PATHFINDER

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Americana

Our Oldest Soft-Drink

TULAPAI is brewing on the Arizona mesa.
Made of corn and Jimson, it's Apaches' favorite "pop."

America's earliest soft-drink was, and is, Tulapai. Today descendants of the first Americans are almost ready to harvest the corn that will be next winter's food-drink for New Mexico and Arizona Apaches.

Corn (i.e., maize) has constituted the principal item in the American Indian's diet for thousands of years. Green, it is still relished as "roasting ears"; dried, it is ground into meal for bread, or parched. Apaches, broadly hinting that the making of Tulapai may have come up from the Aztecs, pay no heed to what the world's doing elsewhere while they concentrate on their corn harvests. From ten to 30 gunnysacks of seed will be enough to "Tulapai" the average Apache household all year.

Land is broken and planting is accomplished in one operation. Corn-planting Day is a big day, with each member of the Apache family contributing something. Soon after sunrise the prairie schooner, carrying the entire family, rumbles out to a bole-flared juniper alongside the corn patch. A team of pintos driven by the older boys pulls a ten-inch mole-board plow handled by Papa Apache. Mrs. Apache trails along behind, dropping the seed of the blue-hued corn. Since the growing crop will get no cultivation, Apaches plant a corn that's hardy and mountain-acclimated. Also, reports say, it thrives well in weeds and is drought-resistant.

About now, awaiting Jack Frost's first light touch upon the landscape, they prepare for harvest. Then they return to their corn patches for the first time since the planting. This journey demands much communal ceremony. Teen-age girls entertain the babies while brothers and fathers carry armloads of ripe ears to huge piles where squaws sort them. Mouths begin to water. Here are the makings of hundreds of gallons of Tulapai.

The drying process must be quick. Squaws haul the ears to flat shed roofs where, after a few days of sun, the crop is ready for shelling. Again the hands of the squaws are put into play for, somehow, it is accepted that the men are best at watching. Shelled and sacked, the corn is toted down to the nearest creek.

A week later pitch-blackened five-gallon cans, half filled with water, begin to simmer on a copious bed of hot oak coals. Presently the water-carriers shuffle in with another load—dripping gunny-sacks, bulging with soaked corn. Now. grandmothers join the group at the fires to manipulate the "metate" or pestle, and pummel the water-swelled kernels to a paste. The aroma is that from a freshly-filled silo. The corn-pulp is plopped into the boiling water and aromatic cedar limbs are laid on the coals. Squaws go from can to can, stirring the contents with a stick that once was a broom-handle.

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their Tulapai by going up-creek for a sackful of Jimson weed roots. The men hack them up and drop them into the crude corn mash. For four hours, on this 5,000 foot plateau of the Apache country, the mixture boils. At high noon, having attained the consistency and complexion of bean soup, the Tulapai is ready to drink.

Then the Apaches, with Tulapai as their loadstone, put on real pow-wows. No trouble telling where the party is. Like spokes toward a hub, Indians converge on the wickiup from everywhere. Outside the abode are five or ten five-gallon cans. Quart-cups or granite bowls stand beside them. Men gather around, talking a little, drinking more. The Squaws compare this year's product with last, note some slight departure from the ancient routine, its benefits or detriments. All afternoon men, women and children imbibe freely of Tulapai—the earliest of America's soft-drinks.